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ROYAL AUVERGNE SANS TACHE

BY MARSHALL PUTNAM THOMPSON

FOR two hundred years the regiment Royal Auvergne had merited its surname "*Sans Tache*." It had marched and fought in Bavaria and Saxony, Bohemia, Hesse and Brunswick. The "Street of the Priests," the borders of Spain, Italy, Africa, the Balearic Isles were familiar to it. It had "dug in" in Flanders, waded through the mud of Holland, done garrison duty from Strasburg to Marseilles, participated in the great reviews at Paris.

Its uniform was magnificent, its accoutrement superb. It had its *fraters* (hairdressers) and its lacqueys. It spent, by regulation, three hours a day at its toilette. It was not for Royal Auvergne to black its own boots, plaster its queues, pomade its mustaches, clean its white gaiters or polish its silver buckles.

Recruited originally from volunteers of Auvergne, its members, as permitted by the old regulations, had married and brought their wives to the regiment, and the wives and in time the children accompanied the regiment on the march, camped with it and were as much a part of it as the men themselves.

The children grew up in the regiment, the boys became its soldiers, the girls the soldiers' wives, and in time other generations succeeded. Six generations had passed from its cradles to its ranks.

The regiment was not only a regiment, it was a Seigneury, its Colonel was not only its Colonel but its Seigneur. It was a family, a tribe, in winter a town, in summer a small nation. In its collective capacity it was a nobleman, sixth in rank among other regiments of the same dignity, greater than some thirty others of like character, far greater than a hundred or so of the mere line. It had its precedence and its "Honorifics"; it held the right of the line; the flags of other regiments bowed before its colors; it took the salute; it headed the charge.

They were no mere *fantassins*, they were treated with respect,—"Messieurs of Auvergne will it please you to charge." Even the King addressed them as "*Messieurs*."

They did not have names like other men; the regiment baptised them when they joined; they were called "Breath of Mars," "Powder of Iron," "Richelieu," "Bayard," "Roland."

If their officers were worthy, the Grenadiers gave them their franchises; elected them as Grenadiers and obeyed them. If not worthy, they fought as they pleased, but always fought well, and generally conducted their affairs in their own way.

If a Seigneur was a real Colonel he might even call them not "*Messieurs*" but "*Mes enfants*"—such a one was a member of the family.

In the days of Henry of Navarre their Seigneurs were Lords of Auvergne, as brave as themselves, who always tasted the soup in the kettles. Under Louis XIV, the Seigneurs were still great noblemen and still were soldiers. Under Louis XV, times had changed, the Seigneurs were noblemen; in fact, while under Henry of Navarre a man must be a soldier to be a noble, under Louis XV he must be a noble to be a soldier; but such nobles came appointed by the Court ladies because they could dance, and before the regiment could make men of them, some other Court lady removed them, and it was not only their Colonels, but the Generals of the Army that Madame Pompadour thus appointed and removed, and since the beginning of the Seven Years War they had not participated in a victory.

They had a regimental fund, a large one,—and was it any wonder when after four years of the war they wintered in the Duchy of Berg, and their Colonels danced in Paris, that they proposed to drill as they pleased and to handle their fund as they pleased, by an assembly of the whole regiment, where each man had his say? No Court officer from Paris should introduce, as they tried, Prussian flogging, and no Colonel of Madame Pompadour's selection determined the spending and care of the fund,—and word came to Paris that Royal Auvergne was undisciplined and out of hand, and at the moment there was a competent Minister of War, Choiseul.

Then had come, as Colonel, the Comte de Rochambeau, a

Brigadier-General, and more than that, a "Grenadier of France," who had received the "Franchises of the Grenadiers" for his gallantry eighteen years ago, the franchises of the Grenadiers of Marshal Saxe, when only a lad of seventeen, and then, as now, "frail and of delicate health."

He was a man, he dared call them "*Mes enfants*." He would have nothing to do with their assembly; he had them elect a committee of three to handle the fund and he dealt alone with the committee. Some grumbled,—it had become a privilege to bandy words with the Seigneur, but one glance from the eye of General Rochambeau was sufficient.

How he drilled them! Morning and noon and night he drilled them, and not only in manual and evolution, but in shooting, yes, think of it: in shooting at a mark, not by the volley from the waist, but each man had to take aim and to be drilled individually,—and it was said he wanted to change the regulations and take two hours from the toilette, dismiss the "*fraters*", and devote their time to shooting.

Another innovation: the Grenadiers,—the tall men,—had their privileges; it was ancient history that they should, and the General did not interfere. He was a short man himself, still he was a Grenadier, but he took the short and active men and organized them in companies he called "*Chasseurs*"; had put them in light uniforms; had given them a strange drill, when each man fought by himself behind a tree or a hummock of grass, and advanced not shoulder to shoulder, but as did the huntsmen, spreading out like a fan when they beat up the game. This, it was said, he paid for from his own pocket as well as the extra pay and allowances the Chasseurs received, and the people in Paris said it was all nonsense. The Colonel said, however, that it was the way all armies would fight in the future and was the way they fought in America. He had had letters about the defeat of "*Le General Braddock*" and the English line, about the time he himself was at the siege of Mahon.

Of course men had grumbled at these new-fangled ideas, but not for long,—for there were such punishments, not the rod, no, General Rochambeau did not approve of flogging, he said it was not what the King of Prussia laid on his soldiers' backs that won

them victories, but what had been put in the King of Prussia's head, and that no French soldiers should be flogged in his command. No, there was no flogging, or hanging by the thumbs, or riding the wooden horse, much worse,—a man disobedient was forced all day to wear his red cotton night cap¹,—think of it for a soldier of Auvergne! Who could stand the laughter? Who could approach a girl?

If men got drunk on duty, the Colonel would not even confine them to barracks, but told them as he had told his men at Mahon, that no such men should charge with the regiment in battle, and thereafter none were drunk on duty.

Well, the Colonel was right in everything he did, for at Minden, Royal Auvergne saved the army from utter destruction, and saved it again once and twice and thrice on the terrible retreat to the Rhine, and in the retreat it was the Chasseurs that did the work, shooting behind trees and advancing and retreating, each man for himself from tree to tree, when Marshal Contades thought all was lost for lack of space to deploy in line of battle in the "*Ordre Profond*."

Six years of the Seven Years War had come and gone, and for six years the Duke of Brunswick with an inferior army and superior talents had kept a superior French army, the Army of the Rhine, from either staying long in Hanover or even passing from Hanover into Prussia. He was not only a brilliant soldier, but an excellent negotiator and had finally succeeded in getting the English to agree to a plan which would involve a large contingent of English troops, would protect Hanover and would be an offensive campaign in fresh territory.

He proposed first of all to capture Wesel, where the French like the English at Mahon were trusting too much to fortifications; then to make Wesel a base of supplies, cross the Main, join hands with an army of twenty thousand English, and descend on Austrian Flanders, like a thunderbolt. This would force the French to withdraw from Germany, give the loot of Belgium to the Hessians and the Brunswickers and eventually carry the war into the enemy's country.

It was the most "dangerous blow aimed at the French since

¹ *Sur la Desertion, Rochambeau.*

the beginning of the War,"¹ and when on or about the twentieth of September the news came to Marshal de Broglie² of what was afoot, he was much disturbed and detached M. de Castries³ to assemble all the detached garrisons along the lower Rhine and all the troops en route from Flanders to reinforce menaced Wesel, the pivotal point of danger. He then got ready to follow with two divisions of his own army to be shortly followed by a third. As part of the two first divisions the regiment of Auvergne received its marching orders.

These divisions marched with the greatest rapidity to Cologne and to Neuse, and by the thirteenth of October, Castries found himself in command of thirty battalions and thirty-two squadrons, a considerable army, but composed of units that had not heretofore acted together.

Seeing that Wesel had already been besieged since the third of the month, Castries, without waiting for his third division, left on the fourteenth.

At the head of his advance guard, he rode on to Rhineberg, and found there a small guard of twelve hundred men, who were brushed away by the corps of Ficher after a very slight resistance, and during the night embarked his advance guard on the Rhine, on whose current they floated into Wesel without opposition.

On the fifteenth the rest of the two divisions proceeded to the Canal of Rhineberg, behind which they pitched their bivouac. At Rhineberg itself they placed M. de Chabo, with an advance guard of three thousand men as a strong outguard, and at the Abbaye de Camp further up the canal, the corps of Ficher to cover the left. The camp of the main army had its left at the hamlets of Camperbrouck, its right about half way to Rhinebeck, the canal guarded its front, and Castries intended to await there the arrival of the third division and then march against the enemy, English and all, and fight them.

After these precautions there seemed little danger of a surprise, but a surprise each moment was drawing nearer, for the energetic

¹ *Rochambeau's Memoirs*, Author's Translation.

² Lafayette's commander when he first learned of the American Revolution.

³ Succeeded Sartines as Minister of Marine during the American Revolution.

Hereditary Prince of Brunswick had assembled all his force on the right bank of the Rhine, had crossed over to the left on the fifteenth, and during the night with all his troops, cannon, cavalry and English Grenadiers was pressing silently and swiftly toward the camp of the two divisions, a plan not unlike that of Trenton.

Every army always has one weak spot, and the French army on this occasion was almost caught by the weariness of the men of Ficher,¹ never from their organization remarkable for their discipline, and who, completely tired out by their forced march and skirmish of the day before, had neglected their sentinels and communicatory patrols and were at the beginning of the coming action separated from the rest of the army.

As the evening had come on, and the smoke of the camp fires with its acrid smell had begun to eddy through the company streets, mingled with the scent of the evening stew, General Rochambeau, perhaps instinctively a little uneasy, had gone among his Grenadiers and Chasseurs, as they sat about the simmering kettles of soup, which he tasted,² and told them that at the very first sound of musketry, if any such there should be, they must at once, without further orders, take positions behind some hedges, which he had discovered bordering the fields between the bridges over the canal, and the French left flank.³

Whether his dreams that night brought him premonitions, or whether he remained wakeful, instinctively listening for the tread of feet or the faint clink of accoutrements, he was the only officer that in the middle of the night was ready to take command and to form his men.

At about two o'clock in the morning in the intense darkness of an October night in the northern latitude that crosses southern Germany and Labrador, fifteen thousand British Grenadiers, Brunswickers, and Hessians, the same allies that the French and Americans were to charge twenty-one years later at Yorktown, arrived at the bridge over the canal between the Abbaye de Camp, and the French left flank. The bridge was in position

¹ Organized during the Siege of Prague in the War of the Austrian Succession from the lacqueys horse boys and servants of the Army.

² *La Vie Militaire*.

³ *Rochambeau's Memoirs*, Author's Translation.

where it had been placed in the evening by the order of the headquarters officers, and who had gone off to bed without posting any sentinels.¹ All about lay sleeping soundly the corps of Ficher, except one small patrol, and upon this patrol leaped suddenly in the darkness the advance of the army of the Hereditary Prince. Surprised as they were, overwhelmed as they were, they still managed to fire two small volleys, and at the sound the Grenadiers and Chasseurs of *Royal Auvergne Sans Tache* (who slept seven men under one quilt) threw off their coverings, leaped to the stacks of arms, fumbled doubtless with the straps of the tarpaulins that protected them from the damp, seized the first muskets they laid hands on, and, stumbling over tent pegs and tent lines as they broke from the company streets, rushed to the hedges to peer through the darkness for the enemy, if enemy there were.

Now, Royal Auvergne, as a "Royal" regiment, wore blue coats instead of the white of the line, and the Hessians and the Brunswickers also wore blue; and as there suddenly emerged near the French a serried column, some officer in the ranks cried out "They are our own men."

As they approached, General Rochambeau had reached his men, getting to the hedge almost as quickly as his Chasseurs, and as the men stood not quite sure whether the approaching columns were friends or enemies, Corporal Richelieu (his army name), who had sharp eyes, perceived to the rear of the Brunswickers the red coats and white cross belts of the British Grenadiers, and pointed them out to the General.

At about the same time the Chevalier d'Assis, Captain of one of the companies of Chasseurs, and posted on the extreme left, hearing the report that the approaching column was French, ran out to meet it to discover the truth, was in a moment surrounded by gleaming bayonets in the hands of men who told him to keep still and they would spare his life, and perceived that they were the enemy. A moment later, the gallant officer cried the terrible words: "Fire, Chasseurs; they are the enemy," and fell pierced by a dozen bayonets.

As the words "Fire, Chasseurs" rang in the ears of friend and

¹ *Rochambeau's Memoirs*, Author's Translation.

foe, the British Grenadiers, who were marching down the hedge to turn the flank and penetrate the camp from the rear, turned and at almost point-blank range poured a terrible and withering volley in to Auvergne. General Rochambeau fell to the ground with a ball in his thigh. Confused as he was by the shock of the bullet, the blood running in a stream from his shattered thigh, unable to stand without support, momentarily growing weaker from the loss of blood, and knowing that if he lost consciousness the army was doomed, he managed to support himself between two Chasseurs, who ran to his assistance, and cried out as rapidly as possible the orders necessary for salvation, his voice momentarily growing weaker:

“Fire by half companies.” “Die at your post rather than give up.” “Wait the coming of the brigade.” “Aim when you fire.”

The three battalions of Auvergne posted on the left, remembering the long days of drill in the Duchy of Berg, the discipline that had stood them in such good stead at Minden, the glorious traditions of over two hundred years, responded by pouring in such a terrible volley that the famous Grenadiers of King George broke as they broke at Bunker Hill.

Prince Ferdinand, however, was a veteran and a wonderful commander, a repulse was not a defeat, and having soon reformed his lines, came on again, but like a football captain who has failed in an end run around the left, he shifted his attack and decided to try the flank on the right.

Dawn was now breaking, the fields behind the French were filled with different regiments hurrying in disorder to cover the front. The mist from the canal and the damp meadows comingling in swirling fog wreaths, some white from the water, some black and sulphurous from the belching cannon, tended to confuse and delay them in taking their proper positions. This left on the right the fourth battalion of Auvergne unsupported, and as the heavy columns of the Brunswickers came on through the mist, the ground shaking with their tread, their bayonets fixed, their sergeants in the German way kicking the men and beating them with their halberds, the officers waving their swords in hands half covered with frills of Mechlin lace, the brigade of Alsace, as German in speech as the Brunswickers, but even then

as loyal French as could be desired, and volunteers, ranged itself beside the fourth battalion. Rochambeau meanwhile, a fog in his throat, more choking than the mist or the sulphurous smoke, still coughed out his orders, the fourth battalion stood its ground as firmly as had the three battalions on the left, and with Alsace helping, and firing by half companies, so that there was no pause for loading, the troops fired and fired again, and a second time men fell from the advancing column, rolled with clutching fingers on the brown October grass, stumbled to their knees, and pitched forward suddenly face downward. Then the ranks seemed to crumble, to disintegrate, and in a moment to vanish, broken and disordered in the fog. The one regiment of Royal Auvergne, practically unaided, had repulsed an entire army.

These troops, however, were veterans of many a battle, their general second only to Frederick the Great among the commanders of Europe, and again they formed, again came on, the British Grenadiers, the light infantry of Hesse, the Deaths Head Regiments of Brunswick, the heavy dragoons, the flashy hussars.

On the French side, "Normandy", composed of green recruits, now swung into the line, there was a moment of disorder, and from front and flank a concentrated fire swept away rank after rank of the French. Auvergne seemed to be disappearing by platoons, but they stood, and Prince Ferdinand could not advance a foot. Up over the fields came the regiment of Tour-du-Pin,¹ of which Rochambeau in Flanders expected to be made Colonel. It was led by de Castries himself, who had wisely accepted Rochambeau's orders like a subaltern, and as yet unscathed, with bayonets fixed, with the quick, short steps of the French infantry at the charge launched itself, a mass of white coats and gleaming steel at the left flank of the British and Hessians, while Auvergne, undeterred by its terrible losses, its Colonel unconscious, every officer of the Chasseurs and Grenadiers killed or wounded, sprang forward in a charge against the flank of the enemy on the right. In all directions the enemy gave ground, and the battle was won. The French did not pursue, they let well enough alone, and for a time wondered whether any were left alive to take the news to Paris.

¹ Minister of War in the early days of the French Revolution, and guillotined.

Magnificent Auvergne was practically gone. The entire complement of officers for the whole regiment was sixty-six, and fifty-eight were out of action, and of the gallant privates eight hundred had fallen on that terrible morning.¹

In most of the tents where, at the volley of Ficher's Patrol, either seven or eight men had thrown aside the great common coverlet, only one or two returned to roll it up, pull out the tent pegs and strike the tent. About two out of every three had fallen, probably more, for the regiment was not at full strength, having met other losses; perhaps two hundred remained. At Bunker Hill the British lost one out of every three engaged, and the Americans one out of five. Generally in the Seven Years War only one out of eight hundred shots fired found its mark, in our Revolution and in the War of 1812, the general record of the American Army was one hit for four hundred shots. At Vera Cruz in 1914, one out of every one hundred and sixty-seven of the Americans engaged was hit, and in the late war the average loss in the last figures given was one out of twenty.

The battle of Closter-Camp was one of the deadliest of recorded history. The French, however, were well content, the result of the battle put an end not only to the siege of Wesel, but also to the projected descent on Flanders. It was the one real French victory having results of the Seven Years War and was fought, as has been said, just twenty-one years before their next victory, that of Yorktown.

Of the Royal Auvergne we hear no more in the Seven Years War, nor does its name appear in the Corsican expedition, the little war that intervened between the Seven Years War and the American Revolution. It had almost ceased to exist; some of its veterans, however, survived; some of its orphans grew up and stayed with the old organization; its name remained; its proud motto remained; its ancient colors remained, one mass of golden embroidery of names of battles, so many that the silken ground-work could be seen only with difficulty.

Brigadier-General Rochambeau had become a Major-General and a Lieutenant-General, and no longer had a regiment.

In 1779 General Rochambeau sailed for the United States with

¹ *Rochambeau's Memoirs*, Author's Translation.

the French expedition, and in the same year a blundering Minister of War took Auvergne and, to the grief and indignation of the survivors, merged this skeleton of a regiment with Gatenois, also a good regiment but without the traditions and "Honorifics" of Royal Auvergne.

Gatenois was then placed on shipboard and sent to the West Indies, thence in 1781 to sail at the urgent request of Rochambeau with Touraine, Royal Agenois, the Royal Engineers, an artillery regiment, and the Irish regiment of Dillon, to join Bourbonnais, Soissonais, Saint Onge, the Bavarians of Royal Deux Ponts, the Artillery train, and the Legion of Luzon at Yorktown, and just twenty-one years after the battle of Closter Camp, the old Grenadiers of Auvergne that had survived, formed the advance of Gatenois as it stood in the trenches ready to head the charge upon the English, Brunswickers and Hessians of Cornwallis on the night of October 15th, 1781.

As they stood there waiting, a short, stout officer, with a voice familiar to the ears of the Grenadiers of Auvergne, began to address them.

"*Mes enfants*,"—a whisper passed through the ranks,—"*It is General Rochambeau.*" "*Mes enfants*, as I have relied on you this night"—the Grenadiers stood, if possible, more attentive than ever, for all the other regiments were green with envy at the honor accorded to Gatenois.

"I hope you have not forgotten that you have served heretofore in that brave regiment 'Auvergne Sans Tache,' a surname honorable, which it has merited since its creation."¹

Silence; then the oldest Grenadier of Auvergne, a lad at Closter Camp, now a man well past middle age, once more spoke to the "*Seigneur of Royal Auvergne*,"—man fashion.

"Promise us that our name shall be returned and we will see that it is defended as of old."²

"They received my word," says General Rochambeau in his *Memoirs*. "Charged like lions and lost a third of their number. M. de Serrail, Captain of the Chasseurs, was wounded and died of his wounds, universally regretted. The King on the report

¹ *Rochambeau's Memoirs.*

² *Rochambeau's Memoirs.*

which I gave him signed an order which restored to that regiment the name of 'Royal Auvergne.'"

It is pleasant to add that the first Colonel of the restored "Auvergne" was the son of General Rochambeau, that he received the "Franchises of the Grenadiers," and that many years later, when Colonel Rochambeau was in turn General Rochambeau and Lieutenant-General Rochambeau was Marshal Rochambeau, the General's son, the Marshal's "Little Grandson Philip" also charged with the Grenadiers and received the same recognition.

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